

1. Victory Gardens

In addition to the Brahmins who supported the work of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, some talent rose from the ranks. Henry Wendler began as supervisor of gardening for the Boston public schools, a position he had held since 1922, promoting children's garden schemes and classroom use of botanical specimens. He took a leave of absence from Jamaica Plain High School and in February 1943 became assistant director of victory gardens for the city of Boston. That spring, Wendler was everywhere in the city—delivering lectures, leading workshops, and sharing advice. As part of the Boston Victory Garden Committee lecture series, Wendler lectured on "The A, B, C's in the Art of Using Fertilizer, Seeds, and Muscle for Cultivation of the Soil." He offered public lectures for hundreds in attendance at Horticultural Hall on soil preparation, garden layout, seed varieties, fertilizers, and insecticides. Novices could also view the demonstration gardens cultivated on Boston Common, where five model plots provided information city hospitals and charities. Adjacent to the gardens, attendants staffed an information booth that did double-duty as a radio studio; three times weekly Mayor Tobin's Victory Garden Committee broadcast a garden advice program from the demonstration plots on Boston Common.

Wendler provided practical advice for local problems, for instance the need to "sweeten" acidic, calcium-deficient soils with lime, which could be accomplished by adding wood or coal ashes (both are sources of calcium ions). Either soil treatment improved the sickly beets languishing in Boston victory gardens. As an ambassador for victory gardening, Wendler also addressed groups such as the Women's Italian Club at the Statler Hotel on April 21, 1943. The program included the garden lecture, lunch, and a program of Italian and Spanish song and dance, and no doubt some women took Wendler's advice to heart. Bostonians (many of them women) grew 20,000 victory gardens, and they exhibited produce at the 1943 and 1944 Victory Harvest Shows at Horticultural Hall. War bonds were awarded to contestants with the best exhibits of vegetables artfully arranged on evergreen or autumn foliage. During these years, the *Chicago Sun* sponsored a similar harvest event at Soldier's Field, and New Yorkers displayed victory garden produce in the lobbies of RKO theaters.²⁷

City sites often demanded tremendous preparation before planting could occur. Fenway Gardens (still cultivated and now a Boston Historical Landmark) started with a model garden planted by Professor Paul Dempsey to show best practices, including soil preparation, cultivation, and handling of seedlings, but before gardening could commence, the site required thousands of cubic yards of fill to raise the land above the height of the adjacent Muddy River. Soil (much of it excavated from the underground subway system) was moved to the site, but it tended toward poor quality with metal shards, bricks, rocks, and other debris to remove. Water was available for gardeners to carry to their plots. Despite these challenges, 260 plots were planted and harvested during the 1943 growing season, and the Fenway Garden Society organized at a 1944 Harvard Club meeting.²⁸

Success in Boston was mirrored statewide. By 1944, nearly every Massachusetts city and town had a Home Garden Committee, and the Massachusetts Home Garden and Food Preservation Program offered seasonal suggestions for organizing and improving the victory garden movement. The theme for 1944 was "more pounds per garden," with close attention paid to soil improvement, fertilizer application, and cultivar selection. The number of factory and workplace gardens also increased each year; local committees provided supplies such as seeds and fertilizer and encouraged boys and girls to become



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